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Blurring Realism and Idealism:

A Review of *Fantasy Interior with Jan Steen and the Family of Gerrit Schouten*

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Jan Steen (c.1626–1679)’s painting, *Fantasy Interior with Jan Steen and the Family of Gerrit Schouten*, (circa 1659–1660), depicts a prominent family leisurely enjoying activities in their home. One can highlight that the family appears to be higher class, educated in humanities, well dressed, hospitable, experienced with music, and slave owners. The painting sheds some light into Dutch domestic lifestyles with humanistic influences. An analysis of the portrait will also reveal the blurring division between real and embellishing touches, which is indicative of dissembling and idealized imagery.

After the Eighty Years’ War (1568–1648), a definite shift in family structures transpired. Philip II of Spain (1527–1598) saturated the Netherlands with hierarchy, position by birth, and rank by estate principles, but inevitably reciprocity replaced those beliefs. The family structure “was built on reciprocal relationships between parent and child, husband and wife.”¹ The dynamics are based off of individualism not hierarchical status. The family social group consists

¹ Sherrin Marshall, *The Dutch Gentry, 1500-1650: Family, Faith, and Fortune* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 1.

of “his or her rights, defined through law and custom.”² Notice how the Schouten family in the painting seems not to be patrilineal and not focused entirely on the male child. Compared to traditional Italian customs, it is in favor of equal opportunities. Additionally, humanistic education seems to be of equal importance for both male and female. Higher class children, who received classical training, “received practical preparation which would enable them to fill their aristocratic roles.”³ Although the Schouten family may have been considered as having “new money,” it would have been important to establish classical training and even more important to expose their education and talents. The portrait supports that perspective since all the daughters are painted practicing music. The portrait puts forth the appearance that the Netherlands was ahead of its time and “even the old simplicity of manners, dress, furniture, and of the way in which the people create wealth for others instead of grasping their own share”⁴ illustrates spreading of wealth and equality. In 1648, the Netherlands finally gained their independence from Spain and established a custom that would flourish into the Golden Age.

Triumphantly emerging from meager times in Netherlands and into the Golden Age, Gerrit Schouten opened a beer-brewing business. Some researchers believe the name of his brewery was The Elephant, which corresponds with the elephant painting displayed on the mantle in the portrait.⁵ Beer was very important, because it helped people avoid the tainted water. Although the business produced a significant commodity, the family most likely did not prosper from the business. Their luxurious lifestyle, as depicted, represented what they would

² Marshall, 1.

³ Marshall, 23.

⁴ Marshall, 11.

⁵ Kimberlee A. Cloutier-Blazzerd, “The Elephant in the Living Room: Jan Steen’s Fantasy Interior as Parodic Portrait of Schouten Family,” *The Journal of History of Art* (2010): 91.

aspire to be or how the family wanted people to recognize them rather than their actual circumstances.

As the artistic current came to Netherlands, notably originating in Italy “a certain luxuriance tending towards external appearance and stylistic ideal,” was certainly prominent.⁶ Throughout the Golden Age, a new wave of art began to flourish and was focused on embracing individualism instead of religious figures and relics. The attention shifted from elaborate religious paintings to “realism that fostered viewing paintings like these as ‘mirrors of nature’ or accurate representations of real life.”⁷ The paintings illustrate domestic lifestyles that were familiar and certainly believable. Although the new art style was surprisingly real, embellishing became the ideal tendency. Ironically, Steen’s typical paintings were not for embellishing but instead “filled with proverbs, symbols, and allegories that suggest an outcome and promote a moral order.”⁸ Steen painted various realistic satires with dramatic moral undertone. Drifting towards the new trend, Steen’s Schouten family portrait is full of embellishments and touches of humanistic values.

In seventeenth-century Netherlands, the higher an individual’s position in society, “the more charged with humanistic elements his culture, and the more he demanded style; style now meant convention, florid ornament, and classical scholarliness.”⁹ Referring back to the portrait, Schouten exemplified the stylistic interpretation of those qualities, and Steen validates the new style that progressed in the Netherlands. Visually, one could simply examine the fine detail

⁶ Pieter Geyl, *The Netherlands in the Seventeenth Century 1609-1648* (Barnes and Noble, 1961), 221.

⁷ Perry Chapman, "Jan Steen's Household Revised," *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 20 (1990): 183-84.

⁸ Chapman, 193.

⁹ Pieter Geyl, 225.

towards a higher demand in refinement and style. With further analysis, some of details that correspond with higher style include the gathering of people, the dress and appearances of both men and women, fine art on the mantle, music, the subtle hints of philosophy, and even a sword hung casually on a chair. The family social gathering is consistent with humanistic lifestyles. The family appears to be civilized, neighborly, and humane. According to Baldesar Castiglione's Renaissance handbook, a lady of higher status should consider "what an ungainly thing it would be to see a woman playing drums, fifes, trumpets, or other like instruments; and this because their harshness hides and removes that suave gentleness which so adorns a woman in her every act."¹⁰ The portrait depicts a graceful woman, revealed to be one of the three daughters, delicately playing a harpsichord, while the other daughter, in the background, plays a lute. Music is a method a woman could express her gentle delicacy and knowledge of art.¹¹ The woman is also wearing garments "that enhance her grace and are most appropriate" and do not appear to be "vain and frivolous."¹² Similarly, the women are wearing garments that tend to their personal style. A woman should know her style is either "bright and cheerful beauty, [and] she must enhance it with movements, words, and dress that tend toward cheerful," and likewise if her style is gentle and grave.¹³ The daughters seem to be in their best-dressed attire and causally entertaining with pleasure.

Focusing attention on the men, there is a high contrast between the men and women and how they are being represented. Although Schouten was a beer brewer and not a man of arms, the portrait displays a sword hanging on a chair. For Castiglione, a man should be "fierce,

¹⁰ Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* (Penguin Classics), 154.

¹¹ Castiglione, 154.

¹² Castiglione, 154.

¹³ Castiglione, 154.

harsh...humane, modest, reserved,” and should be intelligent.¹⁴ Men should also know “how to handle every kind of weapon, both on foot and on horse, and know the advantages of each kind; and be especially acquainted with those arms that are ordinarily used among gentlemen.”¹⁵ It appears that Schouten desires people to see him as both an educated gentleman and an able fighter. The sword is not emphasized in the portrait, but a slight hint is necessary to show Schouten is wholly a gentleman. For Schouten, he may have had an “excessive desire to appear very accomplished,” and remember his legacy, with the newly acquired business.

In accordance with the understated philosophical hints, an inevitable shadow is lurking. Underneath the skull, on the mantle, is a Latin motto that translates to, learn how to die. In addition, the son presents a peeled lemon, which traditionally symbolizes mortality and the passing of time. Regarding the Latin motto, Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) published *Essais* over a period spanning from 1570 to 1592.¹⁶ Within his work he states, ‘Cicero says “that to study philosophy is nothing but to prepare one’s self to die,’ [and he] concludes to teach us not to fear to die.”¹⁷ Although it is not certain if Schouten read Montaigne’s works, the philosophical interpretation is certainly influential. For Petrarch, death is inevitable, and “times permits us miserable mortals, puffed up with emptiness, thus to wander about, until finally, coming to a tardy consciousness of our sins, we shall learn to know ourselves.”¹⁸ Since death is certain, it may best to take advantage of the time permitted and study the classics in order to gain true knowledge of one’s self. People should not be “innocent of knowledge of virtue, and yet harbor

¹⁴ Castiglione, 25.

¹⁵ Castiglione, 27.

¹⁶ Sherrin Marshall, 23.

¹⁷ Michel De Montaigne and Charles Cotton, *The Essays of Michel De Montaigne* (New York, 1894), 61.

¹⁸ James Harvey Robinson and Henry Winchester Rolfe, *Petrarch the First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters: A Selection from His Correspondence with Boccaccio and Other Friends* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1898).

the most exalted opinion of themselves. Not content with losing the words of the ancients, they must attack their genius and their ashes. They rejoice in their ignorance, as if what they did not know were not worth knowing.”¹⁹ In respect for antiquity, knowledge is virtue, and “knowledge was put into practical ends.”²⁰ Steen captures subtle traces of Schouten’s philosophical education with a touch of mortality, comparable to a résumé with a list of qualities. Mortality, as symbolized via the peeled lemon, indicates Schouten’s awareness of death and appears not to fear it. The portrait is an appropriate illustration of the movement towards individualism, realism, and attention towards daily lifestyles. With further analysis, the blurred division between real and embellishing touches is indicative of dissembling and idealized imagery.

In *The Book of the Courtier*, Castiglione illustrates the importance of casually dissimulating one’s character, and similar ideals are carried over into the portrait. A gentleman should practice concealing all his talents in order to seem uncontrived and effortless.²¹ His demeanor should be understated but still ready to reveal itself at the appropriate occasion. If his manner expresses “to labour at what one is doing, and as we say, to make bones over it, shows an extreme lack of grace and causes everything, whatever its worth, to be discounted.”²² Socializing with other people should be customary and effortless. A gentlemen clearly struggling loses the wonder and excitement that facilitates various encounters. In reference to Schouten, he is casually sitting down and “positioned at the ready, so naturally that it seems as if his whole body assumes the right posture without any strain, then even if he does nothing more he demonstrates that he is in complete command of what he is doing,” while the children entertain Steen’s

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Marshall, 23.

²¹ Castiglione, 67.

²² Castiglione, 67.

presence.²³ His manner is refined, and he is not boastfully performing as the center of attention. Instead, his attire is understated, and the attention is concentrated on the children.

Highlighting several dissembling themes illustrates how appearance and accomplishments were a predominant tendency. In what fashion does one depict its qualities was significant as well. Portraits should veil their assets; thus, “true art is what does not seem to be art; and the most important thing is to conceal it, because if it is revealed this discredits a man completely and ruins his reputation.”²⁴ Similarly, magicians do not want to reveal all of their bag of tricks at once, or the attraction and excitement diminishes. Steen nonchalantly and successfully depicts Schouten’s fascination; “in painting, a single line which is not laboured, a single brush stroke made with ease, in such way that it seems that the hand is completing the line by itself without any effort or guidance, clearly reveals the excellence of the artist.”²⁵ Castiglione’s effortless writing unquestionably correspond with Steen’s artistic talent for this portrait. The portrait style renders as realism but in juxtaposition is idealized imagery. The contrast between realism and idealized imagery “effectively blurs the distinction between emblem and real life by convincing us that what he presents is not just life itself,”²⁶ but a real glimpse inside Schouten’s own life. Steen successfully creates Schouten as not merely familiar but as authentic and approachable.²⁷ The embellishments are not flamboyant; instead, the themes straddle realism and idealism effortlessly. Schouten’s nonchalant presence effectively shadows the dissembling taking place and projects an authentic and ideal gentleman.

²³ Castiglione, 70.

²⁴ Castiglione, 67.

²⁵ Castiglione, 70.

²⁶ Chapman, 193.

²⁷ Chapman, 193.

After analyzing Steen's portrait of the Gerrit Schouten family and highlighting idealized imagery, one can differentiate from realism art to dissembling idealism. Dutch domestic lifestyles with Petrarch's humanistic influences were briefly introduced. More importantly, the painting illustrates Castiglione's, Schouten's, and Steen's influences on the portrait's style as well as influences from the artistic movement in the Golden Age. Overall, Steen successfully painted projected imagery that illustrates the blurring of realism and idealism in Dutch domestic lifestyles.



Fantasy Interior with Jan Steen and the Family of Gerrit Schouten, Nelson Atkins Museum of Arts

About the author

A senior at Armstrong, Leandra Gamble is a Law and Society major with a religious studies and history minor. Following completion of the program she plans to further her studies in History and eventually be a professor of history at a university level.